

This Week in Congress

June 18, 2007

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I joined my parents yesterday for the Father's Day service at my hometown church, Plainville United Methodist Church. As part of the service, prayers were said for a successful and safe harvest and for a bountiful supply of food to meet the needs of a hungry world. Even if your family's livelihood does not come from farming, we all benefit from a bountiful Kansas wheat harvest. We have faced our share of challenges in recent months with a spring freeze and severe weather, all of which will inevitably lead to varied yields across the state. But as the combines started rolling this past week, Kansas farmers are once again doing their part in helping feed the world.

House Passes Record Legislation for America's Veterans

On Friday, the House passed legislation for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that

provides a record funding increase for veterans in 2008. During consideration of the bill, I successfully offered an amendment to increase mileage reimbursement rates for service-connected disabled veterans traveling to VA medical facilities. The mileage reimbursement rate has not been changed since 1978.

Many Kansas veterans must travel hundreds of miles to reach a VA facility and at only 11 cents per mile, the reimbursement rate does little to defray the cost of the drive. As we work to boost VA health care, it is important to remember that the medical services offered at the VA can only be enjoyed by veterans if they can get to this care. My amendment doubles the reimbursement from its current rate of 11 cents per mile and will help more veterans afford their trip to the VA to receive the care they have earned.

My amendment was part of a spending bill to fund military construction projects and the VA. The legislation provides a 13 percent increase for veterans medical care, including funding to care for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, expanded mental health treatment and money to address the repair and maintenance needs of VA facilities. This bill also adds more than 1,000 new claims processors to reduce the backlog of pending benefits claims.

I have long encouraged Congress to exercise control of federal spending, but with troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and with an aging veteran population, caring for our nation's veterans should be a priority. This legislation is now being considered by the U.S. Senate. [Click here](#) to view my remarks to the U.S. House of Representatives advocating for the increased mileage reimbursement rate. □ □

Visiting with the FEMA Administrator Regarding Disaster Response in Kansas

This week, I visited with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator David Paulison about the agency's continued response to disasters in Kansas. I thanked Administrator Paulison for the efforts of FEMA in responding to the numerous disasters Kansans have experienced in the last six months. Several counties in Kansas have become eligible for Individual and Public Assistance through FEMA. The Public Assistance program normally requires a 75 percent federal and 25 percent state/local match for recovery funds. Due to the unprecedented damage from tornadoes, severe storms and flooding that Kansans endured during the month of May, I have asked the federal government to waive the state/local match requirement. Administrator Paulison said FEMA officials are nearing a decision on this issue.

Victory for Accountability in the Earmark Process

With the first federal funding bill of 2007 being considered this week, I joined a number of my colleagues in working to establish a process by which Members of Congress and the public could review earmark requests - spending projects for members. Rather than having what was planned by the Appropriations Committee Chairman to have no public review or debate in Congress about these individual spending requests, we successfully forced a process so Members of Congress will have the opportunity to vote on specific spending items and the sponsors of the projects will be publicly disclosed.

Continuing to Draft the 2007 Farm Bill

On Thursday, I joined members of the Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry to draft the farm bill sections relating to these topics. Most Americans think of the farm bill as our way of protecting farmers when commodity prices drop below the cost of producing a crop. The largest spending in the farm bill, however, is on food and nutrition programs that help meet the needs of those in our communities unable to put enough food on their family's table. Several provisions included in the bill approved by the subcommittee will increase benefit levels and remove some barriers to access that have excluded seniors from participating in the Food Stamp Program. [Recent meetings](#) I had in Kansas helped prepare me for this hearing by educating me about how hunger is hurting children in our schools and what can be done to better deliver aid to the needy in Kansas.

In the Office

Bob Riedel of Abilene was in with the Council for Exceptional Children to advocate for increased funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and to share his suggestions for how to improve the No Child Left Behind law. Terry Ruder of Stilwell was in to discuss issues facing Pizza Hut franchises in Kansas. Judy Brahan of Derby and Kande Bradford, Elizabeth Lippoldt, Laurie Lewis and Leighann Prothro of Wichita were in with Inter-Faith Ministries to express the need for strong nutrition programs in the 2007 Farm Bill. Karl Peterjohn of Wichita was also in to visit.

Donald and Jolleen Reinert of Peabody and Eric Payne of Salina were in with the Propane Marketers Association of Kansas to discuss pending Department of Homeland Security regulations that will affect propane distributors and consumers. Marcia Nielsen and Barb Langner of Topeka were in representing the Kansas Health Policy Authority (KHPA) to update me on recent Kansas health care legislation and talk about opportunities for state and federal partnerships. Kari Bruffett of Kansas City was in with the University of Kansas Medical Center to explain the importance of the Direct Graduate Medical Education program to KU students.

Chris Wilson and her daughter Joanne of Manhattan were in with Kansas Agri-Women to talk about issues important to their membership. Frederick Palenske and Michael Mattox of Topeka were in with Blue Cross/Blue Shield to give me an update on their Medicare contract bid and how the Medicare Advantage plan has affected their company. Members of the Kansas Bankers Association were in to discuss regulatory reform and the proposed Horizon's report. In with the group were Mike Stevens of Sublette, Craig Meader of Waverly, Rick Smith of Buhler, Ted Starr and Jim Bush of Hiawatha, Diane Catron and Doug Wareham of Topeka, Dick Nichols of McPherson, Larry McCanes of Goodland, Barney Horton of Atwood, Mike Fahrback of Haven and Mark Lair of Chanute.

On Tuesday, I sat down with Nancy and Don Daniels of Topeka, Reverend Maryannah Mosley of Kansas City, JeAnn Dimmitt and Mary Anne Powell of Salina and Anderson Dugazon, a Kansas Wesleyan University student from Haiti. We spoke about the Food Stamp Program, health care, the struggles of Haitian farmers and other issues affecting the needy around the world and in our communities. Terry Holdren of Topeka was in with Kansas Farm Bureau to discuss the Commodity Title of the 2007 Farm Bill. J. Lynn Smith and Candy Johnson of Emporia, Joan Wagnon of Topeka and Martha Fee of Hutchinson were in representing the Girl Scouts of Kansas to talk about helping girls combat obesity and live healthy lives.

Leslie Kaufman of Topeka was in with the Kansas Cooperative Council to discuss my amendment to allow crop production, subject to a conservation plan, on Conservation Reserve Enhancement acres. Colten Salm and Samuel Fishburn of Haven and Whitney Ginest and Brennan McNickle of Stafford were in our nation's capital participating in the FFA National Leadership Conference. They stopped by my office to talk to me about leadership. Jerry Starkey and Melanie Johnson of Olathe and Robert Pitkin and John Stolte of Overland Park were in with the Associated Builders and Contractors to discuss immigration reform and other legislative issues that affect their businesses.

Jane Rhysall of Topeka was in with the Developmental Disabilities Council to discuss the Accessible Arts program. Peter Ninemire of Wichita and Jared Hersin of Topeka were in with the National Association of Drug Court Professionals to tell me about how drug courts help rehabilitate offenders. Tom Bell and Fred Lucky of Topeka were in with the Kansas Hospital Association to discuss the effects of Medicare Advantage on rural health care. Pastor Dario Vasquez of Salina was in to talk about immigration reform. Tim and Emily Hamlin of Garden City stopped by the office while visiting our nation's capital. Lynn Sparkman from Hays was also in to visit.

Several Kansas FFA students were in Washington, D.C., this week for the FFA National Leadership Conference and came by office. Colten Salm and Samuel Fishburn of Haven were in, as were Whitney Ginest and Brennan McNickle of Stafford. The FFA group from Clay Center included Jay Bohnenblust, Allison Penner, Crystal Cooper, Claire Unruh, Ashley McAdams, Courtney Lang and Alex Moore. Visiting from Hill City were Larry Lyder, Wyatt Robinson, Ross Breese, Anthony McDonald, Meghann Jeffery and Chase Keiswetter.

Many Kansans stopped by my Washington, D.C., office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol building, including Barney and Cathy Horton of Atwood; Taylor Hobbs of Penokee; Gene and Ruth Bloxom of Emporia; and David, Tammy, Megan and Briana Neal of

Inman. In from Hutchinson were Alice, Skylar and Jessica Hayes; John, Dell and Sarah Swearer; Nathan Henry; Steven and Christy Ronsick; and Russ, Debra, Kristin, Brett and Emily Wedel. Ronald and Ragen Stauffer and Kathleen DeWolfe of Overland Park also stopped by. In from Hays were Charles and Cindy Doerfler; Jesse and Bria Zimmerman; and Jeff, Marcia, Austin and Karee Dinkel.

Shana Holsteen of Topeka brought a group of students to Washington, D.C., for the Kansas Electric Cooperatives' annual Youth Tour. Bill Tuzicka of Salina brought a group of students from Southeast of Saline High School to participate in the American Musical Salute to the National Anthem on the National Mall. Both of these groups took a tour of the U.S. Capitol through my office, in addition to their other activities.

Very truly yours,

Jerry